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ABSTRACT

The soundness of the home-school relationship depends on mutual trust and understanding. This relationship is now at risk because schools have not adjusted to single-parent and step-families. Concern about the home-school relationship has increased over the last decade. However, accompanying the recent rise in non-nuclear families is a gap in teachers' knowledge of, and skills dealing with, these families, due in part to the general socialization of teachers in a society which compares non-nuclear families unfavorably with traditional ones. This points to a need for both society and education to examine attitudes and differential perceptions that are destructive toward individuals. Teacher training institutions need to provide experiences to aid teachers in acquiring the skills needed for parental involvement. Possible reasons for institutional shortcomings in this area include: lack of awareness or desire; lack of professional resources on the subject; uneasiness with the emotional and opinion issues surrounding divorce and remarriage; and resistance to further broadening the teacher role. The reasons schools resist dealing with non-nuclear family structures include: complex legal issues surrounding custody; desire to protect student and family privacy; fear that acknowledging divorce will withdraw support for the ideal one-home family; and budget constraints. It is possible to accommodate each non-nuclear family through a combination of individual attention and group/program approaches. A lengthy chart gives recommendations from eight different sources grouped into the following areas: training/awareness for teachers; logistics; schools/parents; curriculum/instruction; teacher/child; legal issues/record keeping; and intervention techniques. (WAS)

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# SCHOOLS AND NON-NUCLEAR FAMILIES:
# RECASTING RELATIONSHIPS

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The soundness of the relationship between home and school depends upon the degree of mutual trust and understanding between them. Cooperative efforts are nurtured by acceptance, familiarity and clear role definitions. Conversely, suspicion and ambiguity surrounding rights and responsiblities thwart robust, effective dialogue. Now, in the early 1980's, the relationship between the home and school is at a risk because schools have not adjusted to the challenges presented by single-parent families and stepfamilies.

## HOME/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Concern about the home/school relationship is not of recent vintage, but during the last decade, schools have increasingly emphasized home/school cooperation (Stallworth & Williams, 1981). Stepped-up efforts are the result of two factors. First, schools receive federal and state financial aid for such programs as Title I & VII and P.L. 94-142 contingent upon meeting obligations regarding parental input into educational decisions for their children. Second, schools are beginning to perceive parental involvement as a mutually beneficial relationship to cultivate. Educators recognize that pupils bring into the classroom not only their intellect to be enlightened but also their psychological and social makeup which has been influenced by past and current family structures. The social research of the mid-1960's pointed to the impact of the family on child development (Stallworth & Williams, 1981). The whole child--

intellect, affect, and influential relationships--can be best understood through an appreciation of family context (Gross, 1977). Gaining insight into a child's family context is not an easy task for schools. The interrational complexity between individuals and their family requires educators to go beyond the skills and knowledge traditionally associated with the teaching profession (Gross, 1977).

Family contexts, in America, are in a state of flux. Teachers once dealt with nuclear families (children living with two biological parents) almost exclusively. In contrast, since World War I, divorced and remarried families have become a major part of the normal family pattern (Ricci, 1979). Visher and Visher (1979) report that about one out of seven children are stepchildren. Teachers are challenged to meet the needs of students from these non-nuclear families: "Times are changing, and as always, educators are called upon to respond to these changes" (Hogan, 1982).

Can educators adequately respond to these changes in family dynamics which Ricci (1979) describes as "mind-boggling and frustrating?" Hogan (1982) concludes that educators feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of one rapidly growing family form -- single-parents. Visher and Visher (1979) state that schools, like other institutions, have created only gradual provisions for the existence of stepfamilies. It would seem that there is a gap between teachers' knowledge about and skills in dealing with non-nuclear families. Schools display daily reminders of a school/family credibility gap: textbooks

geared primarily to nuclear families; school forms which do not allow for information about absent parents or stepparents; and school projects (e.g. making Father's Day cards or mother-daughter banquets) which are ill-suited to single-parent or stepparent situations (Ricci, 1979). How did these practices and oversights come to be? Three factors affecting teachers need to be examined in order to answer that question: general socialization of teachers, professional preparation of teachers, and the schools in which the teachers work.

General Socialization of Teachers

Educators are socialized by our culture long before they receive professional training or begin teaching. No educator can escape society's imparting of values regarding family, divorce, and remmariage. Teachers' ability and willingness to deal with new family forms partially stem from their exposure to attitudes and expectations held by the larger social group.

In general, non-nuclear families are not well understood by our society. They are compared unfavorably to nuclear families, often relegated to second class citizenship, suffer from stereotypic views and often find themselves being discriminated against by various institutions, including schools (Visher & Visher, 1979). To further complicate the situation, single-parent families and stepfamilies are unsure themselves, what their roles are, where their boundaries should be placed and even what they should be called (Visher & Visher, 1979).

What implications can be drawn from teachers' enculturation regarding non-nuclear families? McFall (1974) cautions that "society in general and education in particular need to examine attitudes (toward single-parents) that are destructive to individuals." A study completed by Santrock (1978) points to the potential harm teacher attitudes can create for children of non-nuclear families. The results of the study indicated that behavior of children from father-absent homes is likely to be perceived more negatively by teachers than the exact same behavior of children from nuclear families (Santrock, 1978). This differential perception has come to the attention of non-nuclear families. Single-parent families think that schools assume that any problems a child has are due to the family structure (National Committee, 1978). Are teachers' perceptions of behavioral differences between children from various family forms based upon fact? Conflicting views are expressed in the literature. Some feel that the stress involved in these non-nulcear families is bound to negatively affect the children (NAESP Report, 1980; Randall, 1981). But, Hammond (1979) suggests that educators should guard against jumping to such generalizations. Coleman and Ganong (1980) conclude there is "little basis for a gloomy prognosis of stepchildren's social/emotional behavior."

One might hypothesize, that in general, educators' attitudes toward non-nuclear families have a good chance of being no better or worse that society's as a whole. Thus, the lack of understanding about and acceptance of the new family forms are rooted, at least partially, in cultural influences. Altering

societal views would probably result in a better home/school interface. "The myths and ignorance surrounding this family form (stepfamilies) are harmful and should be dispelled" (Coleman & Gagnong, 1980). Fortunately, there have been some indications that the public's attitudes toward single-parent families and stepfamilies are shifting to a more positive position (Hogan, 1982; Normet, 1981; Parks, 1981).

Teacher Preparation

If skills in working with all families are necessary teacher competencies, then logically one way for educators to acquire such skills is through preservice training. Stallworth and Williams (1981) advise that undergraduate teacher preparation programs should provide experiences which create an awareness of family dynamics and an understanding of the psychological needs of children resulting from their cultural context (i.e. family, home, community). "Colleges should be encouraged to offer more psychology and child development courses" is the suggestion Gay (1981) has for teacher preparation. Teacher trainers also feel that preservice work in parent involvement is necessary (Stallworth & Williams, 1981).

Unfortunately, teacher training institutions have not addressed the skills needed for parental involvement (Stallworth & Williams, 1981). Moreover, Drake (1981) charges that most teachers have not received special training in dealing with non-nuclear families. Hogan (1982) believes that teachers in the field feel unsure of their ability to meet the needs of students from single-parent families. The fact that it is suggested that

teachers attend workshops (Drake, 1981; Hammond, 1979) and districts offer inservice training (Damon, 1979; Hogan, 1982) focusing on new family forms is further evidence that teachers in the field are apparently ill-prepared to meet the challenges of home/school relationships with the entire spectrum of family structures.

What has precipitated these apparent inadequacies in teacher preparation? Several sources are submitted for consideration. Maybe colleges lack the awareness or desire. After all, department chairpeople, professors and state certification committees are enculturated by the same society which still holds fast to myths and stereotypes about new family structures. Even if colleges desire to add the study of non-nuclear families to the curriculum, professors can turn to only a few professional resources for guidance. There is limited professional literature (Johnson, 1981) and no systematic inquiry into clinical impressions (Visher & Visher, 1979) about stepfamilies. Information about single-parent families is of "uneven quality, too narrowly focused, or as yet inconclusive" (Damon, 1979).

An alternate explanation is that teacher trainers and trainees feel ill-at-ease when dealing with the emotional and opinionative issues surrounding divorce and remarriage. This suspicion is collaborated by Orton's (1981) research which found an increase in college teacher's levels of anxiety when they dealt with emotionally-laden subject matter through discussion.

Possibly, inadequate preparation of educators to effectively relate to non-nuclear families emenates from how broadly colleges of education view the role of the teacher. Gilliss (1981) asks

his readers how far can teachers be expected to extend their traditional instructional roles in order to accommodate demands created by social concerns. Macdonald (1979) suggests that teachers cannot be "omnicapable." Weininger (1979) acknowledges the enormous social responsibilities of schools but proposes that schools "train people to work in a variety of roles within the school--so those who want to TEACH concentrate on more finite and thus perhaps achievable tasks." Even if accepted as one of their missions, teachers are already "burdened" by the need to cope with an array of social problems not directly related to the 3-R's (PDK, 1980). Should teacher preparation programs decide the scope of educators' roles and how open-minded their attitudes should be? As of yet, these issues have apparently not been directly addressed by teacher preparation programs.

Schools

Professionals in the field evidence uncomfortable and ambiguous feelings and behavior toward non-nuclear families. School staffs and policy mirror attitudes and knowledge similar to that of the general population and teacher preparation programs. Educators are discovering that non-nuclear families present endless complications for institutions which typically relate to parent/children through the traditional ideal of the never-divorced family (Parks, 1981; Ricci, 1979). The variability of family structures exceeds schools' ability to adjust their policies and procedures (Visher & Visher, 1979). The large majority of teachers misunderstand single-parent families (Exerpts, 1979). Schools have been slow to take note of the

recent dramatic changes in family structures and are still influenced by stereotypes of non-nuclear structures (McFall, 1974).

Why are schools experiencing uncertainty in adapting to families which do not fit the nuclear family mold? The answer may be that the staff in the schools are unable to excape the influences of their upbringing and professional training. Educational systems are microcosms reflecting broader social values, knowledge and practices which are replete with misunderstandings and ambivalencs.

However, many schools are approaching new family structures, but in a tentative manner. Ricci (1979) surmises that schools and other institutions resist probing non-nuclear family structures for many good reasons:

1) Complex legal issues surrounding custody. Should non-custodial parents recieve reports, be invited to conferences, or be allowed to pick up children from school if the custodial parent wishes otherwise? What if there is a conflict between what is best for the child and what is legally prudent for the district?
2) A desire to protect the student's and family's privacy. Schools are "walking a tightrope between concern and a desire to offer more support on one hand, and meddling or interfering on the other" (Parks, 1981). Querries into the personal life of children and families may collide with the democratic underpinning of schools (Damon, 1979).

3) A feeling that treating all families equally means treating them in a "one-home" style. This model of equality is probably the most familiar to schools and therefore the easiest to apply.

4) An underlying fear that to acknowledge divorce and remarriage openly in policies and procedures will some how withdraw support for the ideal one-home family. Addressing new family forms has political overtones (Gray, 1981). Cognizant of general disapproval of divorce by such institutions, parents who are contemplating divorce or remarriage are in a quandry about whether to inform the school or not (Parks, 1977).

5) The budget constraints leave schools hard-pressed for the time and money needed to meet the changing needs of families. For example, Drake (1981) points out that handling the communication needs for two different parents may take extra teacher and school secretary time.

Ricci (1979) advises that changes need to be made in the awareness levels, procedures, and family/school dialogue. In some districts, specific practices have not been delineated due to cautious attitudes of policy makers who are afraid to generalize from small amounts of adequate research and theory (Damon, 1979). Further delays in adjusting to new family forms are created by a lack of state or federal administrative codes addressing pertinent issues in the interface between non-nuclear homes and schools (Drake, 1981).

Can schools wait until substantive research has been completed and interpreted? Such a posture may exacerbate a problem which is described as already being serious (Damon, 1979). Schools have the potential to offer much support and stability to children who are experiencing dramatic changes in their family structures (NAESP, 1979; Parks, 1977). When social institutions such as schools "open avenues to allow non-custodial and stepparents to establish responsible relationships with their children, family life after divorce" has a better chance of being positive (Ricci, 1979). Teachers can greatly contribute to the adjustment of stepfamilies and single-parent families by modeling acceptance of various family life styles (Hammond, 1979). This potential for positive influence should be cultivated and utilized.

## What Can Be Done Now

Schools are charged with the responsibility to relate knowledgeably to these new family forms (Ricci, 1979). It would be philosophically inconsistent for schools to ignore the needs of non-nuclear families while at the same time espousing society's intentions that schools meet the needs of all children (Randall, 1981). School policies and procedures should reflect more flexibility and awareness on the part of teachers and administrators. Districts can accommodate each non-nuclear family through a combination of individual attention and group/program approach (Damon, 1979).

Popular professional literature does offer some guidelines for schools committed to meeting the needs of all family

forms. The vast majority of policy and procedural suggestions for schools are geared toward single-parent families. The paucity of advice for stepfamilies is not surprising since, compared to single-parent families, they have been studied and written about for only a short period of time. However, since all stepfamilies spend some time in a single-parent situation and may still deal with an absent parent along with a step-parent, many of the suggestions remain applicable. Recommendations from eight different sources have been grouped into five areas in the chart that follows.

POLICY AND PROCEDURAL SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND NON-NUCLEAR FAMILIES

| Brown, 1981 | Damon, 1979 | Drake, 1981 | Hogan, 1982 | NAESP, 1980 | National Committee, 1978 | Parks, 1981 | Ricci, 1979 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | **A. TRAINING/AWARENESS FOR TEACHERS** |
| | X | | | X | X | X | | Plan inservice workshops to make personnel aware of what children may be experiencing during times of separation and loss. |
| | | | | | | X | | Do be willing to ride out the storm--many problems will be temporary. Also, everything may not be terrible at home. |
| | X | | | X | | | | Be aware of your own feelings. |
| | | | | | | | | **B. LOGISTICS** |
| | X | | | | | X | | Encourage development of before- and after-school care or recreational programs. May coordinate with other community agencies. |
| | | | | X | | | | Provide sitter service during meetings. |
| X | X | | X | X | X | X | | Schedule parent-teacher conferences when working parent(s) can attend. |
| X | X | | X | | X | X | | Consider having school counselor available one evening a week for single or working parents. |

| Brown, 1981 | Damon, 1979 | Drake, 1981 | Hogan, 1982 | NAESP, 1980 | National Committee, 1978 | Parks, 1981 | Ricci, 1979 | LOGISTICS (continued) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | X | | | | | Coordinate car pools for various events. |
| | | | X | | | | | Recognize time management and communication problems caused by sharing time with two parents. |
| | | X | | | X | | | If discipling is necessary, explore alternatives to suspension, a hardship for working parents. Be flexible in removing unnecessary hurdles to adjustment and examine priorities(rules may need bending). |

C. SCHOOLS/PARENTS

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | X | X | X | | | X | X | Don't make special events difficult for single parents (father-son dinners, Mother's or Father's Day). |
| | | | | | | X | X | Send notes home to "Dear Parent or Guardian." |
| | | | | | | X | | Don't load a single parent with school obligations, but do encourage him/her to stay in touch with school programs. |
| | | | | | | X | | Be aware of free or reduced cost meal opportunities and recommend them when possible. |
| | X | X | X | X | | | | Recognize that some single-parents may not be able to afford additional expenses. |

| Brown, 1981 | Damon, 1979 | Drake, 1981 | Hogan, 1982 | NAESP, 1980 | National Committee, 1978 | Parks, 1981 | Ricci, 1979 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | SCHOOL/PARENTS (continued) |
| | X | | | X | | X | | Do talk with parents if possible. Each situation is uniques and there may or may not be excessive stress at home. If necessary, schools could refer parents to services including: economic, legal or health aid; day care; Big Brothers/Sisters, etc. |
| | | | | | | | | D. CURRICULUM/INSTRUCTION |
| | | | | X | X | X | X | Make sure library and curriculum texts include many life styles. |
| | | | | X | | | | Teach survival skills--food preparation, first aid, etc. |
| | | | | | | | | E. TEACHER/CHILD |
| | | | | | | X | | Deal with specific behaviors. Children may use divorce as an excuse to misbehave. |
| | X | | X | | X | X | | Watch your talk and eliminate "broken home" and other terms indicating single parent families are inferior to other families. |
| | | X | | | | | | Decide what last name should be used for the student. |
| | | | | | | X | X | Do not say, "Get your mom and dad to help you with...." |
| | X | | | X | | | | Be alert to behavior changes. |

TEACHER/CHILD (continued)

| Brown, 1981 | Damon, 1979 | Drake, 1981 | Hogan, 1982 | NAESP, 1980 | National Committee, 1978 | Parks, 1981 | Ricci, 1979 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | X | | | X | | | Suggest that single-parent children be placed with male teachers when possible. |
| | X | | X | | X | | | Use reflective listening techniques to indicate recognition of their feelings. |
| | | | X | | X | | | Do not pity the child. S/he may then pity him/herself. |
| | | X | X | | X | | | Communicate empathy and support. Let children see you as real people. Secretary, custodian, nurse, administrator and teacher can show nurturing behavior. |
| | | X | | | | | | Do not expect children to exhibit all aspects of traditional male/female roles. |
| | X | | X | | | | | Give students opportunities to "excel" and "be in charge." |
| | | X | | | X | X | | See if absent parent wants to become involved in school programs. |

| Brown, 1981 | Damon, 1979 | Drake, 1981 | Hogan, 1982 | NAESP, 1980 | National Committee, 1978 | Parks, 1981 | Ricci, 1979 | F. LEGAL ISSUES/RECORD KEEPING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | X | | | | | | Examine residency requirements for attending local schools. |
| | | X | X | | | X | | Know which children may be involved in custody problems as a precaution against childsnatching. |
| | | X | | X | | X | X | In most states, both parents have legal access to school records. |
| | | | X | X | | | | Send notes home to both parents in the case of co-parenting. |
| | X | | | | | | | Give teachers a chance to share information from one year to the next. |
| X | X | | | X | X | | X | Be aware of family structure through accurate record keeping. Change forms if necessary. |

| Brown, 1981 | Damon, 1979 | Drake, 1981 | Hogan, 1982 | NAESP, 1980 | National Committee, 1978 | Parks, 1981 | Ricci, 1979 | G. INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | X | | | X | | | | Be prepared to refer the family to in-house or outside resources. |
| | X | | X | X | | X | | Consider developing a peer counseling program, group support program, or link up with programs in which grandparent volunteers or high school students "adopt" a younger student. |
| | X | | | X | | X | | Use stories or literature that portray single-parent families. Bibliotherapy or filmstrip programs are options in upper grades. |
| X | | | | | X | X | | Promote parenting skills classes, such as Children and Challenge, PET or STEP. |
| | X | | | X | | X | | Call on Parents Without Partners to help with family life classes and PTA or inservice programs about single parenting. |
| | | | | | | X | | Consider a support group for single parents. |
| | | | | X | | | | Maintain library materials about non-nuclear families for use by single parents. |

The results from examining the overlap among the various lists suggest that there are procedures or issues of varying priority. Areas of relatively high concern are:

1. Scheduling parent conferences and counselor times that will accomodate single-parents and non-custodial parents.
2. Being sensitive to the financial burdens in non-nuclear families, especially for single-parents.
3. Finding ways to eliminate the awkwardness of special events such as Father's Day and mother-daughter banquets.
4. Eliminating negative vocabulary from one's vocabulary.
5. Resisting the temptation to assume that children in non-nuclear families will automatically have adjustment problems of a significant magnitude.
6. Devising a record keeping system that gathers and passes along basic information about absent parents and step-parents. Being aware of laws regarding access to records.
7. Planning inservice workshops on non-nuclear families.
8. Investigating the possibility of peer counseling or support groups for students or parents.

## IN SUMMARY

Divorced and remarried families constitute a major part of our normal American family pattern (Ricci, 1979). Schools, like society as a whole and teacher training programs, are not sure how to relate to non-nuclear families. The interface between schools and non-nuclear families has been strained by misconceptions and a lack of awareness. The origins of this awkward home/school relationship are multidimensional; the solutions are multifacetted. However, despite the complexity of the issues and dirth of research regarding single-parent families and step-families, schools can begin to implement commonly advocated strategies for accommodating non-nuclear families. The times have changed and so can schools.

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